

Black Like Me?

Embedding 2-Tiered Procedural Rhetoric in a Critical Game

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the theory and implementation of a 2-tiered procedural rhetoric game. The game, Black Like Me, employs critical design to encourage players toward situational analysis instead of mere attribute matching. Players are presented with a color matching game at the surface, but the game is designed to reward players for holistically evaluating a scene and subverting the explicitly suggested game rules. The game is designed to train players toward perceiving ambiguity and employing alternative play strategies.

Author Keywords

Game Design; procedural rhetoric; critical design ; critical gameplay

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0. Personal Computing Games

INTRODUCTION

The Critical Gameplay project is a 4 year ongoing project to create and embed critical design games. The games have been exhibited at a variety of academic showcases, creative exhibits and related events in Europe, North and South America. It is an effort to raise awareness around game design assumptions that permeate traditional play[1]. Since 2009 the games have been displayed at 25 venues.

Game designers are often reluctant to embrace alternative play within the systems they create. In reality some of the most successful play experiences are about designers merely providing a set of toys through which players can explore concepts. This is true of megahits like Minecraft and World of Warcraft to construction set franchises like Civilization, The Sims and Tycoon games. However, the fundamental distinction is that many of these games seek to impose specific ideologies about the way systems operate. The Sims for example, can be understood as a model of capitalist ideology [2]. This practice in games is as old as Monopoly itself, a game designed to impart Georgist economics [3]. The history of such games is largely tied to the implementation of political ideologies or game theory.

On the other end of the spectrum are contemporary, self-identified social impact games. These games attempt to provide overt messages that are similar in character to first generation educational films. The games are often literal and their messages direct. Such games frequently ostracize their experience, leaving it at the fringes of player preferred play and interest. The games may ultimately become popular among the niche that produces

and champions it. This is appropriate for developing a community around the practice, but it fails to impact those who do not know about such play or the concepts it seeks to promote.

The goal of the third generation of Critical Gameplay practice is to bridge this dichotomy in what is commonly described as procedural rhetoric [4]. Instead of providing overt messaging on the game's agenda, it seeks to offer fundamentally basic and inviting gameplay based on new concepts in play. The gameplay continues to embed a message through mechanic, but the mechanic is subtle. The goal is to create games that can be popular of their own right. Yet, instead of revealing themselves as social impact, players do what they naturally do – look for the fastest way to win the game. The game's message is embedded not in the explicit rules of play, but in the resulting methodological framework players derive to win. The lesson is not in the winning or playing as instructed, but in the player's experience in discovering a better way to win.

The question the modern, digital designer must ask is how contemporary computer games utilize their larger player base to encourage players to think differently about the systems they assume on a daily basis. How can a game make people more aware of their own innate stereotypes? How can designer's help people practice becoming more open minded, or perhaps even adopt an entirely new mindset?

THE DESIGN

As a Critical Gameplay game, the game Black Like Me is designed around a simple premise - create games that identify the weakness in specific problem solving approaches. If games are understood as practice in problem solving, then the instruction sets and rules in games are the structure on which that practice is built. Popular games ask players to do fairly basic tasks like match similar colors, objects and patterns (e.g. match 3 games) . This type of practice is not inherently philosophical. Yet, its prescription is clear. Players should seek out likeness, finding things that belong together by appearance.

This assumption of the match interaction, of finding similarly colored objects or discerning objects by color provides a conceptual scaffold whether intended or not. The scaffold is one which supports an oversimplified image or attribution. Like colors must be grouped. All white tiles in one section, all black tiles in another. The question to ask is what happens when that oversimplification asks players to discern the shades of grey that are inevitably true to life? Isn't the understanding of such shades one milestone in maturation as a medium as an individual?

Black Like Me's first layer of play works to play upon this first question. Players are asked to match one tile to another tile of the same color in a grid. As they match correctly, the game's color range is reduced until the last matches in a round are narrowly

different shades of black. Where once there were many heterogeneous tiles selected out, there are now fairly homogenous tiles left. At this level, the game is practice in ambiguity and selection.

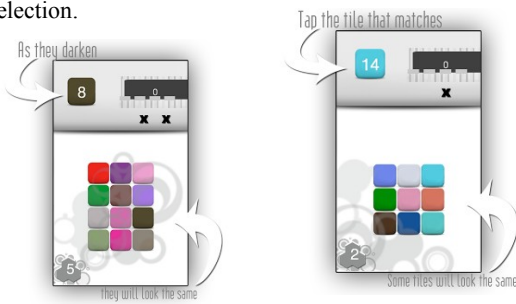


Figure 1. Black Like Me Game with directions provided in mobile App stores.

Games are also generally prescriptive in their play. Players understand a right way and a wrong way to play. In digital play, the wrong way is enforced with punishing consequence (e.g. game over, round lost, or unsupported results). Too often games are accepted as simple rule sets and players are rarely supported in critical examinations of those rule sets. Playing a shooting game as a pacifist does not disarm your opponents, it simply leaves you prey to aggressors.

Black Like Me is designed for one simple execution of critical playing. Keeping with the expectations of games that comply with Google Play and Apple App store requirements the game presents itself as a standard matching game. The match is presumably based on color, as the games instructions imply.

In reality, the game becomes impossibly difficult when players discern by color. Instead players can examine the game screen more carefully. There is a trick. The match tile may have the same color, but it also behaves differently. The last tile to appear on the screen is the tile the player wants. The difference in timing is perceptible, but in milliseconds. When the player observes this, the challenge in the game is greatly simplified. If the player stares at the whole screen, instead of discriminating for the one single, affirming color match, the pattern becomes apparent.

This game is then about more. It is not about affirming the game mechanic - find two things alike and match them – a constant practice in classification. Instead, the game is about asking more questions of the game system. This is more than a cheat, as it is explicitly designed into the game as the true way to play. Players are rewarded not for cheating the system, but for asking a single critical question about the gameplay experience – can I play this game another way?

CONCLUSION

Black Like Me has proven a relative success for such alternative play. It's \$.99 USD version has ranked in 9 countries on the Apple App store; Sweden, Australia, United States, Netherlands, Italy, Germany, United Kingdom, Spain and France. It has ranked in the top 100 dice or puzzle games in Sweden, Australia and the United States[5].

This distribution and sales activity is not a bragging point; it is simply a demonstration that such multilayered play has potential in the general entertainment space. The game was never billed as educational, artistic or critical. Yet, that is what it is. Players of Monopoly don't prepare themselves to engage in a Georgist

rhetoric game, they engage in simple entertainment. Not every player will comprehend the message, but every player is receiving the practice in ambiguity or the revelation that the game can be beat by holistic evaluation.

In Black Like Me, the way to winning the game or getting the highest score is not through color matching, it is through ignoring color and watching for behavior. The game is designed around a revelation scenario designed to inspire thoughtful reflection in players. Revelation scenarios are meant to become pivot moments at which a player says, I remember when I thought that game was really difficult, but then I realized I was playing it the wrong way. Such practice does not support mindless adoption of rules, but instead encourages players to question the rules, not only ways in which the designer may support efficiencies (e.g. cheats).

This Critical Gameplay practice is about layering more than one set of procedural rhetoric. Players have the surface experience, which is mundane entertainment and perhaps ultimately frustrating. The second layer is one which players are rewarded for evaluating the mechanics and exploiting the weakness. Ultimately the weakness is embedded, but by so being embedded they are a designed rhetoric. Like the rhetorical structures of alliteration, simile and metaphor the player is given an opportunity to accept the experience as sounding good at the surface or querying author intention.

Black Like Me is designed to be difficult when players match tiles on color. The longer they do it, the harder it becomes. The more people learn about each other, the more they should learn that it is not the color of one's skin that is a basis for match, it is behavior. This is where the title of the game is derived. The title references the sociological experiment of a Caucasian man who colored his skin to live as an African American. Despite the praise for this kind of research, is simply pigmenting your skin a true view of life as an African American? It also references the notion of rhetorical simile, which draws parallel where parallel may not be perceived. Should you group two people who look the same, or should you ask more meaningful questions about why they belong together?

Aesthetics, whether clothes, material expression, etc are not the only means for identifying matches in grouping. Two things that seem to look alike, may not really be the same. A player's only chance is in their ability to comprehend the entire scene and find pattern. The game endeavors to drive that point home through practice without ever explicitly referencing its meaning. Not every player will comprehend the message, but every player is receiving the practice in ambiguity or the revelation that the game can be beat by holistic evaluation.

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